

## Government Accountability Office Report Raises Red Flags on DOE Nuclear Waste Reprocessing Program

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### Government Accountability Office Report Raises Red Flags on DOE Nuclear Waste Reprocessing Program Current DOE GNEP Plans Would Heighten Nuclear Proliferation Risks Report Says

Washington, DC — Leaders of the Committee on Energy and Commerce today released a new Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that calls into question key elements of the Department of Energy's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP). The GAO report, which may be downloaded at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08483.pdf>, questions the Department of Energy's (DOE) plans to commercialize a plant for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel from power plants as part of the Department of Energy's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. Rather than building a commercial scale plant using dated technology for reprocessing spent fuel, GAO recommends instead that DOE focus on research and development of advanced reprocessing technologies.

Members of the Committee on Energy and Commerce said that the GAO report demonstrates the need for DOE to proceed slowly with its GNEP plans in order to avoid committing funds to dated technology that carries clear proliferation risks and to ensure taxpayer dollars are wisely spent.

"I urge DOE to heed GAO's recommendations and refrain from rushing ahead

with the construction of reprocessing plants until the technology is mature, the economics are well justified, and the non-proliferation benefits are shown to be more than wishful thinking," said Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. "Unless the Secretary is prepared to abandon Yucca Mountain, let me restate my strong objection to taking money from the Nuclear Waste Fund for GNEP. The Secretary should not make any irretrievable commitment of resources, beyond a modest program of research, until GAO and the National Academy of Sciences have validated the technology and economics for an undertaking that has been estimated to cost as much as a half-trillion dollars."

"While reprocessing technology may have the potential to solve a potentially long term nuclear waste problem, the GAO's report makes clear that DOE is not ready for prime time," said Rep. Bart Stupak (D-MI), the Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. "DOE's track record on large scale nuclear projects is characterized by massive cost overruns and project failure. For that reason, I urge the Secretary to heed GAO's recommendations and complete research and development before racing ahead with yet another high risk project that could set back our efforts to solve the nuclear waste problem."

Some have touted the DOE's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) as a solution for reducing the amount of high level radioactive waste from nuclear power plants that has to be placed in a geologic repository, such as Yucca Mountain.

GNEP calls for the construction of plants to chemically process spent nuclear fuel, and recycle some of the long-lived radioactive elements in yet-to-be-developed nuclear reactors. However, the report from the GAO found that DOE's current plan to accelerate deployment of GNEP using off-the-shelf chemical reprocessing technologies (originally developed for making nuclear weapons materials) would not achieve DOE's clearly stated waste reduction and non proliferation objectives, and would likely draw resources away from developing advanced technologies which might meet these twin objectives over the longer term. According to GAO, the only technologies which could be commercialized at this time would result in the separation of pure plutonium, leading to heightened proliferation risks. The advanced technologies that could meet the DOE's stated objectives of reducing waste while also reducing proliferation risks have not yet been fully developed, the report said.

GAO's report also indicates that if DOE's current plan is implemented, it will require significant government funding. While DOE and proponents of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership have suggested that rapid commercial scale deployment would need little government support, GAO's review of industry proposals submitted to DOE "suggest the opposite". Indeed, industry proposals reviewed by GAO found that initial facilities "would rely entirely on government support" and call for

loan guarantees to attract private investment.

Ultimately,  
the report recommends that DOE reassess its preference for accelerating commercial deployment, and urges instead that DOE complete research and development on advanced reprocessing technologies and specialized nuclear reactors before making commitments for new facilities.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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